

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING**  
**Minutes of October 19, 2021**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Nathaniel Miller, Charles Morse, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Grace Vinson (Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission), Kristen Curry Gadbois (Vermont Department of Economic Development), Erin Hicks-Tibbles (NCDN), Carolyn Stevens (NCDN), Patrick DeMasi, Colin Bright, Merry Shernock, and Elroy Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Participants had the option of attending the meeting either in person or remotely through Go-to-Meeting.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIENCE.** Those persons present were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The remote contingent also participated as much as possible.

- III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

- a. American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021.** Chair Maxwell said the Select Board members are beginning the process of trying to determine what to do with the \$1,900,000 in COVID-19 local recovery ARPA funds that have been allocated to Northfield. This is the first meeting dedicated to this purpose alone so there will be some initial discussion of possible projects along with the best manner to obtain input from Northfield residents. Grace Vinson from the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC), which has been assisting local governments with these issues, is present tonight to provide an overview of the process. Chair Maxwell said the Select Board would start developing a list of potential projects for these funds. The list eventually will be finalized, prioritized, and an implementation plan developed.

Ms. Vinson then provided a PowerPoint presentation on the current federal rules regarding local initiatives that would or would not be eligible for ARPA funding. The first category is "Pandemic Response," which would require determining the monetary impact of COVID-19 on the Northfield community, local businesses, etc. This could include compensating companies that lost revenue, had to incur extra expenses in order to maintain operations while complying with pandemic-related restrictions, etc. There also could be assistance to households that lost income due to pandemic-related unemployment or reduced work hours and as a result had difficulty paying utility bills, property taxes, and other expenses. The second category is "Premium Pay," which would be supplemental payments to local essential workers, such as grocery workers, first responders, etc., who continued to interact with members of the public while most businesses, local governments, etc. significantly reduced or eliminated direct contact. The third category is "Lost Revenue," which seeks to compensate local governments that saw less money coming in due to the pandemic. This might include unpaid property taxes, reduced usage of public utilities, etc. The municipality would have to estimate the amount of revenue loss and the New England Municipal Resource Center (NEMRC), which provides financial software and other revenue management assistance to local governments, would be willing to help with this. The fourth and final category is "Water, Sewer, and Broadband Infrastructure." Ms. Vinson said any proposed water, sewer, or stormwater project must conform with EPA standards and must have water quality benefits. Broadband projects must focus on providing residents who live in unserved or underserved areas with high-speed internet access. The minimum acceptable internet access speed resulting from such an initiative would be twenty-five megabits per second (25 Mbps).

Ms. Vinson then discussed uses that would not be acceptable according to current ARPA rules. This would include using the funds towards current pension commitments, infrastructure projects other than water quality improvement or broadband access (such as highway projects), setting the funds aside in a "rainy day" account, using the ARPA funds to eliminate outstanding debt, etc. She added that municipalities had until the end of 2024 to decide how to spend these funds and another two (2) years to disburse the monies. Ms. Vinson noted that the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) will be providing separate funding for water, sewer, and wastewater projects that would supplement any use of ARPA funds for these purposes.

Ms. Vinson said CVRPC has developed a two-page document that summarizes ARPA "Best Practices" and clearly delineates proper usage of these funds. She will email this to Manager Schulz for distribution to the Select Board members and all other interested parties. Chair Maxwell then asked if the Select Board members had any questions regarding Ms. Vinson's presentation. Board members Miller and Goodrich had no questions but were grateful for the information provided. Board member Morse feels local restaurants that created outside seating and other accommodations to meet state social distancing requirements should receive some compensation for this extra expense. He then asked why electric utility projects seem to be excluded from ARPA funding. Ms. Vinson said there is no clear reason provided for this but the federal government did choose to limit eligible infrastructure projects to those focused on improved public water quality and expanded broadband internet access. Chair Maxwell shared the appreciation for the information provided by Ms. Vinson. He noted that this is the first step in a long process and there will be many opportunities for public input. He then said Manager Schulz and municipal department heads have provided some suggestions for possible projects that would make use of ARPA funds. These will be the first entries on the master list of potential ARPA projects.

Manager Schulz said one possible project would be the replacement of the waterlines on South Main Street, which are over one hundred (100) years old and long overdue for replacement. The estimated cost of this would be about \$950,000. There also is a need to replace about four thousand feet (4,000') of waterline located on side streets. Manager Schulz believes the Water/Sewer crew would be able to do the installation work themselves so ARPA funds would only be used for buying the materials. Another possibility is purchasing "smart meters" for the Water Department at an estimated cost of \$150,000 to \$200,000. Manager Schulz is unsure if such a project would be ARPA-eligible. Manager Schulz said another suggestion has been to upgrade Northfield's emergency operations centers at the Northfield Fire Station and Police Station by purchasing generators that would allow both to continue operating during a prolonged power outage. The estimated cost of this is about \$125,000. Another possibility is to upgrade Northfield Fire Department (NFD) air pacs and protective gear at an estimated cost of \$125,000.

Manager Schulz said another suggestion would be to digitalize additional municipal documents, especially land records. Some of this has been done previously due to an earlier grant but this would complete the work. This could reduce the amount of foot traffic into the building. In a similar vein, there has been discussion of expanding the ability of municipal customers to pay online or over the phone by credit card. Currently, this is only available for utility payments. Another possibility is to modify the Municipal Building to allow for improved customer access while providing for proper social distancing, etc. Cybersecurity is a growing concern and ARPA funds could be used to protect the municipality from online hacking, etc. This could include installing security cameras at various sensitive locations, such as the electric substation.

Manager Schulz said it might be possible to use some of the ARPA funds to cover some of the additional costs the municipality incurred during the pandemic such as purchasing hand sanitizers, face masks, etc. Another possible use would be to purchase PowerLoads for the two (2) Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) units. These can be used to load heavier patients quicker into the ambulance unit without risking back strain, etc. Another proposal is to establish a permanent home for CERV's clothing and food shelves by modifying the lower level of the Municipal Building. Manager Schulz said there have been other suggestions to assist local non-profit organizations that have had their operations and/or fundraising efforts disrupted by the pandemic. This would require forming a committee to review applications for assistance.

Chair Maxwell then asked if any of the Select Board members had any suggestions for using the ARPA funds. Board member Goodrich would like to see the municipal sewerlines extended northward and southward. This would especially impact Northfield Falls, which is a designated Village Center. Board member Miller thinks the suggestions made so far are all good ideas. However, after working out of his farm for the last year, Board member Miller understands especially well the need to extend high-speed internet into underserved areas. He has had to make do with speeds of no higher than 5 Mbps, which made certain tasks especially difficult.

Board member Miller noted Northfield already is a member of CVFiber, which is a Communications Union District (CUD) attempting to extend broadband internet to the more rural areas of Central Vermont. Chair Maxwell asked if the municipality can do anything directly regarding high-speed internet or should it work through CVFiber. Ms. Vinson said CUDs like CVFiber will be receiving considerable state funding to help achieve their goals but municipalities could shift some of their ARPA funds to them. The rules regarding this are unclear so this may not be permissible. It probably would be best to wait on any transfer of funds until the final ARPA usage rules have been finalized. Board member Miller noted CVFiber serves a large area comprised of twenty (20) municipalities so there is no guarantee bringing high-speed internet to Northfield is one of its current priorities. Ms. Vinson said there would need to be documentation that any ARPA funds Northfield provides to CVFiber are actually spent in Northfield.

While acting as a Northfield Farmers Market vendor, Board member Morse heard some discussion of creating additional outdoor meeting places in the downtown area as the Common sometimes feels crowded if you're trying to maintain proper social distancing. Board member Morse suggested the possibility of having a parklet area designed into the new Main Street Bridge as the current one is scheduled for replacement in 2025. This would provide residents with the opportunity for riverside dining, etc. Board member Morse agrees with the need to extend the sewerlines. This idea was popular with Farmers Market customers as was extending high-speed internet access. Board member Morse is concerned that with the federal government apparently changing the criteria regarding ARPA eligibility for certain projects, the municipality might get stuck with the bill should a project once considered eligible change status at a later time. Ms. Vinson felt that was unlikely as municipalities will be provided the funds in advance conditional on providing sufficient documentation afterwards. Kristin Curry Gadbois from the Vermont Department of Economic Development (DED) also felt this was unlikely as the guidelines for water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure probably will not change and the funds cannot be reclaimed by the federal government.

Board member Stevens agrees with the need to extend the municipal sewer system southward and northward. He also would like it extended along Freight Yard Way, which is an underdeveloped area in the heart of the downtown. Board member Morse noted the current waterline to this area is too small to allow for much future development. Board member Stevens also agrees with the need to help CERV upgrade its facilities. This non-profit does much good for the community. Chair Maxwell said once the potential project list is finalized and prioritized, there will be a need to determine whether the ARPA funds could be used as leverage to obtain additional outside funding. He felt water and sewer expansion and/or upgrade projects are important for future local economic development and using outside funding will reduce the need to bond. Manager Schulz noted the engineering plans for sewerline expansion already are sixty percent (60%) complete. Chair Maxwell then asked if any of the members of the public in attendance had any comments or suggestions of their own.

Ms. Gadbois felt Board member Miller was correct in stating how the lack of reliable high-speed internet is having a detrimental impact on underserved areas of this community. She noted that many local students rely upon remote learning and quite a number of residents are now working from home, either for others or for themselves. Should their broadband go down for some time, that could be an entire school or business day lost. Erin Hicks-Tibbles from the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) agrees that cybersecurity and emergency response readiness are important considerations due to the increasing number and variety of man-made threats. She also believes the municipality should hire a consultant to assist with determining the exact costs of the economic hit taken by local government and businesses due to the pandemic. A local Economic Development Director (EDD) could assist with this but Northfield doesn't have one at this time. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles also feels the number of free public Wi-Fi areas in Northfield could be increased and extended beyond the downtown.

Carolyn Stevens (NCDN) said there are some local projects that are so urgent that NCDN members feel they should be pursued quickly. This would include the creation of a promotional website for the Northfield community as well as the establishment of a group that would assist existing local businesses and attract new ones. Accomplishing these items would greatly benefit the community in both the short- and long-term. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles thought this promotional website could be used to assist local businesses and individuals learn about the availability of pandemic recovery funding and the process for obtaining those funds. Ms. Stevens felt this also shows the need for a permanent EDD.

Chair Maxwell said the Select Board next should consider ways to obtain effective public participation in this process. He felt it might be a good idea to engage with existing groups in order to obtain views in smaller gatherings where people would feel able to speak freely about their ideas, concerns, etc. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles thought it might be useful to include a survey in the utility bills, which are sent out each month. Board member Morse felt it might be more useful to send a questionnaire to all property owners listed on the Grand List. He noted that not all residents, especially on the backroads, are customers of Northfield water, sewer, and/or electric. Merry Shernock feels that sending out surveys to only property owners will miss a lot of residents, such as renters, Norwich University students, etc. She would like to see a broader outreach that would include groups, such as the American Legion, who don't usually get involved in municipal matters. Chair Maxwell thought perhaps Ms. Shernock could develop a list of such organizations and forward it to Manager Schulz. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles thinks it might be useful to arrange a gathering of local business leaders and thus have a brain-storming session on possible local use of ARPA funds. Chair Maxwell said he tries to meet individually with local business leaders at least once a year in order to obtain their views on community matters and how the municipality could be of assistance to them.

Chair Maxwell then asked the Select Board members how they would like to incorporate public input on this matter into their regular meeting schedule. Board member Goodrich suggested holding a one-hour session on ARPA funding prior to future regular Select Board meetings. There was no objection. Board member Morse felt that in the interim, the survey document should be drafted and prepared for general distribution.

**V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled).** There was none.

**VI. EXECUTIVE SESSION.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1), in order to discuss a personnel matter and contract negotiation with Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 8:12 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 8:57 p.m. No action was taken.

**VII. ADJOURNMENT.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 8:58 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of October 26, 2021.